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A *Retroactive Interference* between Art and Architecture

A Research Experience between Art and Architecture about the Vele in Scampia and its Future

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Synopsis

Thinking about the architectural project as a broader process first requires reflecting on the role of architecture in urban transformation. In different ways the project becomes an element of interpretation of the real world, and the architect, as an author, conquers a position that goes beyond the classical boundaries of the discipline, through the contamination with other disciplines. Art has always been an interpretative tool. In particular, the research presented focuses on the retroactive interferences between Art and Architecture and on the ability of architecture to extend the limits of the imaginary, both as a discipline capable of interacting with different skills, and as an architectural artefact considered as an Open Work. The architecture of the "Vele" in Scampia is the protagonist of this research, that supports the production of the background material as part of a visual art project of the photographer Hans Wilschut for the Center for Visual Art CBK in Rotterdam, carried out in collaboration with the curator Patricia Pulles. The architecture of the "Vele", the impressive visual impact and the interesting architectural structure that is still present, but heavily damaged, and the impact that this architecture has on the perception of the same inhabitants and the actual decline of the area towards a new future, are the key topics of this extended abstract.

Key words: Ecological thinking, architecture, disciplines, society, hope.

1. Introduction

The urban studies in recent years are shifting the focus on the search for "new materials" that aim to solve some problems of cities, linked to climate change and the risks associated with it. In the first place this leads architecture, and in particular the architecture that looks to the city, to regain a central role with respect to society: central because it is a tool for the convergence of a series of related skills that widen the gaze of the discipline. Who is responsible today for how our cities are made?

The task of making the city is not a sum of individual categories. Politicians, administrators, architects, urban professionals, all feel somehow protagonists of the processes that affect the city. In reality today there is not a single profession able to link different agendas, ways of thinking, skills and basic jobs¹ (Landry 2009).

In this sense, the reflection on the "ecological thinking", on the idea that every information or knowledge is inseparable from its cultural, social, economic, political and natural context and on the need to simultaneously hold together a series of knowledge in the project, it's the basis to be involved, as designers, researchers and educators, in the design of the contemporary city. "The separation of disciplines makes it impossible to grasp what is woven together. [...] There is a complexity - when the different components that constitute a whole are inseparable- [...] and when there is an interdependent, interactive and inter-retroactive link between the parts and the whole, and between the whole and the different parts"². (Morin 2000)

This thought is dynamic and stimulate the search for relations between each phenomenon and its context. It is a matter of considering political ecology as a democratic science at the basis of teaching. (Latour 2001) In this idea of "ecological thinking", art re-conquers its function in "revealing" the relationship between the humans and the world³. (Dorfles 1968).

In Architecture this idea of "ecological thinking" refers to those transformations of contemporary culture that affect the architectural project redefining its scope, in different aspects: the ethical aspect, the collaborative approach, the relation between techniques and poetry, the social dimension.

In different ways the project becomes an element of interpretation of the real world, and the architect, who is the author, acquires a position that goes beyond the classical boundaries of the discipline, through the contamination with other knowledge. Art has always been an interpretative tool. Today the role of the architect has changed, and consequently also the research that it is opened to collaborations, with public bodies, with professional studies, with associations that operate in the social, artists and cultural centers.

The relationship between architecture and humans (its inhabitants) is today one of the most important topic to be discussed in our research field.

Precisely this quality of architecture to coordinate (by vocation, as Gropius

¹ LANDRY, 2009 p.309

² Edgar Morin in his essay "La Testa Ben Fatta" introduces the concept of interconnection between disciplines in education

³ DORFLES, 1968 "in Artificio e Natura" pag. 20-21

says) on one hand makes it open to endless opportunities for comparison, which could be called *interference*, and at the same time makes it capable of influencing other kinds of processes.

2. *Retroactive Interferences* in Scampia between Art and Architecture

In particular the research presented in this abstract focuses on retroactive interferences between art and architecture and on the ability of architecture to extend the limits of the imaginary, both as a discipline capable of interacting with different skills, and - in its proper meaning - as an *architectural artefact* capable of extending and modifying the life of its inhabitants. "Any relationship between a building and its users is one of violence, for any use means the intrusion of a human body into a given space [...] The architecture should be pleasing to the eye as well as comfortable to the body...The love of violence, after all is an ancient pleasure⁴. (Tschumi, 1979)

The Interference theory refers to the *interaction between new learned material and past behavior, memories or thoughts that cause disturbance in retrieval of the memory* (Psychestudy 2018). A Retroactive interference in neuroscience⁵ is defined as *a memory interference by any post-learning material* (Muller and Pilzecker 1900). It occurs when newly acquired information causes us to have trouble remembering old information.

This reflection came into my mind considering the research experience carried out – as architect and as researcher expert in architectural and urban studies- in collaboration with curators, artists and NGOs in Naples, where art is considered as a tool to better understand the city. Those projects have in common the reflection on "Memory" as a *post-learning material* (as a retroactive interference).

Several artists have been collaborating with architects, and uses the architecture and the city as an experimental field.⁶

The research presented in this text is about the elaboration of background materials for a visual art work on Scampia by the photographer Hans Wilschut and carried out with the art curator Patricia Pulles⁷.

Starting from April 2017, with a visit on the site in the area of the Vele in Scampia, the research has been carried out between September 2017 and

⁴ Tschumi in its Advertisement on Architecture challenges designer to consider the possibility that the design cannot be innocent.

⁵ Müller and Pilzecker (1900) addressed some of these issues in a remarkable manner but their observations have been mostly ignored in recent years. Müller and Pilzecker showed that the materials and the task that intervene between presentation and recall may interfere with the to-be-remembered items, and they named this phenomenon "retroactive interference" (RI). They further asked whether there is a type of RI that is based only on distraction, and not on the similarity between the memoranda and the interfering stimuli. Their findings, and our follow up research in healthy volunteers and amnesiacs, confirm that forgetting can be induced by any subsequent mentally effortful interpolated task, irrespective of its content; the interpolated 'interfering' material does not have to be similar to the to-be-remembered stimuli. In Forgetting due to retroactive interference: A fusion of early insights into everyday forgetting and recent research on anterograde amnesia, Michaela T. Dewar, Nelson Cowan, Sergio Della Sala. Cortex. Author manuscript; available in PMC 2009 Feb 17. Published in final edited form as: Cortex. 2007 Jul; 43(5): 616–634 - U.S. National Institutes of Health's National Library of Medicine (NIH/NLM).

⁶ Let's think to the movement of the "Arte nel Sociale" carried out by Enrico Crispolti in Italy and in Napoli in the Seventies, or to the most International work of Gordon Matta-Clark. Matta-Clark spoke to interviewers of being fascinated by the architectural spaces, or 'recurrent dream spaces' as he called them, each of us stores within the mind, and that one of his proposals to the Anarchitecture Group was concerned with 'designing for memory'.

⁷ The project has been funded by funded by the Center for Visual Arts "CBK" of Rotterdam.

January 2018 in providing the background materials for the production of a film through a series of interviews and interactions with the families and the study of the housing structure of the building and its relation with the context.

The work sees the architecture (and its inhabitants) as protagonist, the skin of the buildings, the size, the spaces, the corridors of the Sails, the sound that is evoked by the same materials, the steps of the people crossing the building trampling deteriorated stairs, the voices of its inhabitants, the “intrusion of the human body” into the space. The images tell of a memory that the same architecture tells. “Design is the most human thing about us. Design is what makes the human. It is the basis of the social life, from the early artefacts to today’s ongoing exponential expansion of human capability”.⁸ (Colomina, 2016)

The stories of the inhabitants interviewed highlights conflicting feelings about the “Vele” as architecture, conceived as home and at the same time as a cage.

Built in the 70s by a project that interprets the canons of the modern movement and looks at the utopia of metabolic aesthetics, the “Vela” becomes an icon of time, an architecture capable of transforming itself from an icon to a modern ruin. (Fig.1)

The architecture of the “Vele” has been considered as an “icon”. The power of the design, the impressive visual impact and the interesting architectural structure that is still present, as well as the subsequent modifications that however have not altered its imprint, became part of the collective imagination of both its inhabitants and people that looks at it from outside.



Figure 1. The Vele in *Le Occasioni di Rosa*, film by Salvatore Piscicelli, 1981.

Today the Vele are in the collective imagination synonymous with degradation, delinquency, and represent the dark image of a society bent to the logic of criminal organizations. That same gloomy image is reflected in the soul of those who live there, it is difficult to hear the word hope, difficult - if not for children to imagine - a new future.

The City Council of Naples has decided, on the basis of a project carried out in collaboration with the Department of Architecture and the “Comitato Vele” the association of Inhabitants who lives in the Vele, in 2017⁹ to demolish three of the existing Vele. A public competition will be launched after the demolitions.

⁸ COLOMINA, Beatriz, Mark WIGLEY, 2016. *Are we human?*. Lars Muller Publisher. Pag.11,12

⁹ The project RESTART Scampia was carried out by the Assessorato ai beni comuni e all'urbanistica – Department of Urban Planning of the City of Naples, by a team led by the Councilor Carmine Piscopo, and it was approved in August

3. The architecture as an artifacts, from “Icon” to an “Open Work”¹⁰

Architecture through its ability to extend the limits of art crosses the image and gets to talk to the inhabitants, from the betrayed project to the demolition, so much discussed, as desired, a demolition that leaves space to hope a new future, new capacity for imagination. (Fig.2).



Figure 2. Modern ruins, the Vele. Photo of the Author, November 2017.

In this case the interference between art and architecture manifests itself in its key role in the interpretation of the work, focusing on a historical moment that sees the end of an era approaching the history of urban transformations of the city, and above all, looking at a new future, at the mental construction of a new image. Art brings to light the real nature of an inhabited architecture. Art helps to reflect on space, through a political approach in reading the landscape.

4. Open conclusions

The case of Scampia is not an isolated case, how do large transformation projects influence the collective imagination and how are these experiences communicated and perceived by the inhabitants?

What are the hopes and dreams about the new project and the upcoming transformation? What is the real perception of the inhabitants compared to the architecture of the Vele? The research has highlighted the contradictions that the iconic architecture of the Vele represents for its inhabitants: retroactive interferences that bring to light positive and negative aspects of a iconic architecture that is the true protagonist of this project.

The research underlighted several points that help us to think about the role of architecture. The architect can interfere in several ways in the process of urban regeneration, and such interference become a useful tool to support decision-making processes.

The architecture of the Vele as an Open Work, the inhabited space and its relation with the context has a great impact on the life of inhabitants. A new project for Scampia – after the demolition of the Vele - has to take into account the several retroactive interferences between Architecture, Memory, Imagine, Hope, Future.

2016, the process is ongoing, within the next months the first Vela will be demolished.

¹⁰ Umberto Eco introduced the notion of openness of the Art Work with his essay “Opera Aperta” translated as “the Open Work”.

This is a research in progress, that will follow the further phases of demolition and idea competition launch. During the conference the materials and the progress of the research will be presented compared to the second phase of the project that will be carried out in the following months.

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Biography

Maria Luna Nobile. Architect, and Doctor of Philosophy in Urban Studies she is actually Adjunct Professor in Architectural and Urban Design at the University Federico II in Naples. Her research focuses on the design of the contemporary city, with special attention to the urban regeneration local policies, interdisciplinary and innovative practices especially focusing on the relation between urban development of the city and social issues in the era of climate change. As designer, she also takes part to public competitions on both small and large-scale. Her main publications are on the topic of the interdisciplinary approach of architecture dealing with the global changes. From 2010 she is part of the Organizing Committee of EURAU Symposium, and she is member of the Scientific Committee of the 9th edition of the congress: EURAU 18 on the topic RETROACTIVEARCHITECTURE, organized by the School of Architecture of Alicante University.